Rock Art in the Coalinga Backcountry

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Los Gatos Creek is a principal stream in the southern extremity of the Diablo Range in California. It flows southeasterly into the southern San Joaquin Valley near Coalinga and is thought to have been occupied by the Southern Valley Yokuts at the time of historic contact. Until recently, the archaeology of the region was so little known that early researchers (Kroeber 1925:476) mistakenly implied that it was a cultural desert.

Recent archaeological surveys by the authors have shown the region to contain a diverse array of prehistoric sites including villages, temporary camps, lithic workshops, milling stations, rockshelters, quarries, and rock art sites. The latter group includes petroglyphs, cupules, and pictographs. The temporal association of these archaeological sites and features is thought to span from the archaic to the historic periods.

Seven rock art sites, examined during the study (Figure 1), are described in this report. These sites demonstrate not only that rock art was prevalent in the region but also that it exhibits a surprising degree of complexity and variability. An analysis of site attributes suggests that two distinctive "styles" can be recognized. It is theorized that these two styles could represent an evolution of rock art patterns within the last prehistoric period or contemporaneous art made by two distinctive, culturally dissimilar groups of people.

Study Background

During June of 1987 the California Department of Forestry (CDF) Archaeology Office was asked to conduct a field survey for two controlled-burn projects in Los Gatos Creek Canyon, located approximately 20 miles northwest of the town of Coalinga in western Fresno County, California. Its purpose was to locate and evaluate archaeological sites near areas of proposed ground disturbance and to develop management recommendations for their protection. Several sites were examined and a late prehistoric village on Los Gatos Creek known as the "Corral Site" (CA-Fre-1346) was test excavated (Foster and Jenkins n.d.).

During the four-day archaeological project, the crew was visited by numerous private landowners and ranchers interested in archaeology. Many of these friendly individuals shared information concerning nearby site locations or artifacts that they had seen or collected. On more than one occasion the crew was told of "rock carvings" or "Indian picture-writing" that occurred in the "backcountry." William Johnson (CDF Battalion Chief) coordinated subsequent studies by contacting landowners for information, obtaining survey permission, and leading the authors to rock art sites studied for this paper.

As it turned out, two of the seven study sites had been previously recorded

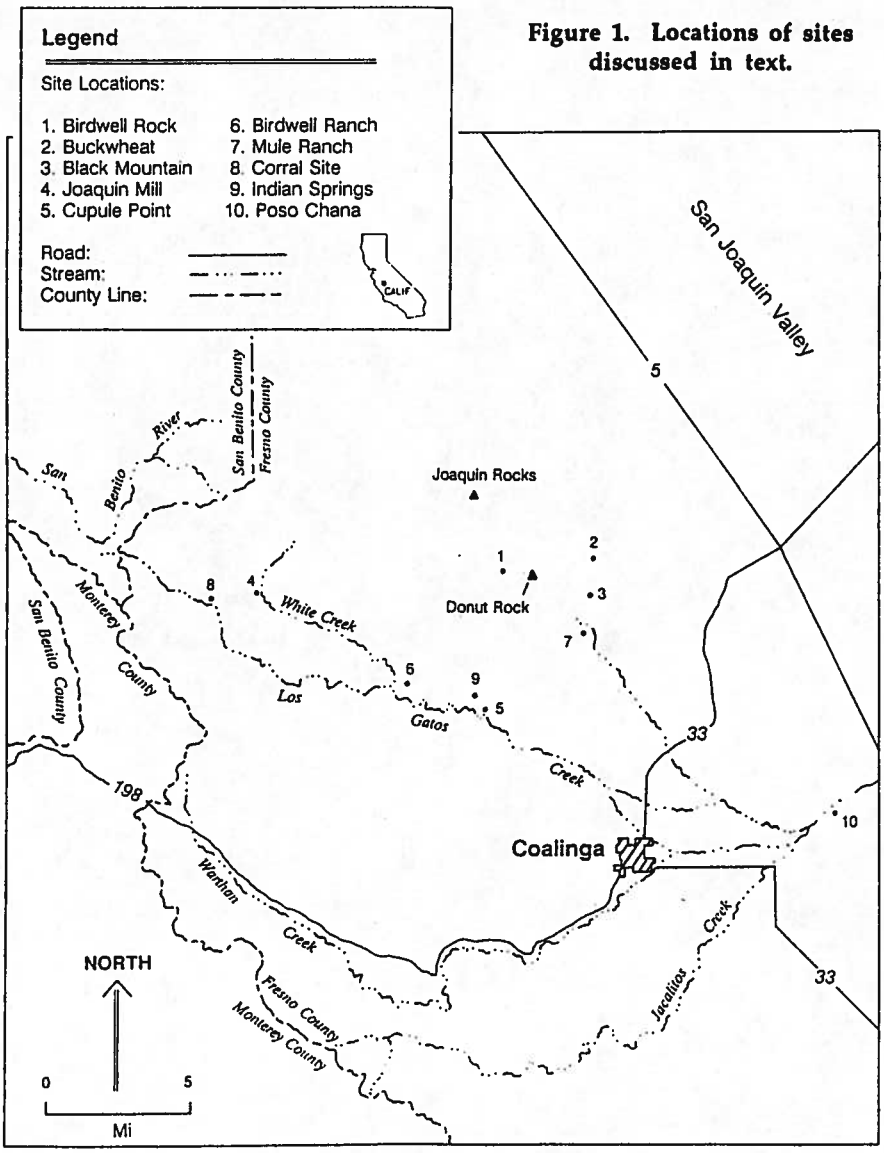

Figure 1. Locations of sites discussed in text.

(Woodward and Manuel 1980; Wren, Johnston, and Bett 1986) during brief surveys by agency archaeologists. The five remaining sites were new discoveries that were formally recorded into the files of the California Archaeological Inventory as part of this project.

Ethnographic Background

The Coalinga area was situated within the territory of the Southern Valley Yokuts at time of historic contact. Their domain was divided into areas held by several distinct sub-groups or tribes, each of which had a special name and spoke a different dialect. The study area and adjacent lands to the south and east were held by a group known as the Tachi (Kroeber 1925:484).

The Tachi were the northernmost of the three Tulare Lake tribes of the Southern Valley Yokuts and apparently one of the largest. Their territory included the northern reaches of the lake, its outlet Fish Slough, and an area west to the crest of the Diablo Range. They wintered at Udjiu (Poso Chana) near Coalinga and at Walna, a point of land that approached the western margin of the lake (Kroeber 1925:484).

Of particular importance to this study is the rather well documented trade that took place between the Southern Valley Yokuts and coastal groups. The village of Poso Chana was apparently an important trading center as noted by Latta (1977:728-729):

> The Indian Traders used to meet at the Poza Chana to meet with the coast Indians. Kahn-te was the oldest chief of the Tache I ever knew. He used to have charge of the trading. He told me all about it and taught me his song.
>
> The bead and seashell traders from the coast met the Tache traders at Poza Chana. The Tache and the other Indians would not let the people from the west come right up to the lake. They were afraid they would learn how to get things without trading.
>
> Kahn-te told me that his people used to trade off fish, kots [obsidian], salt grass salt, and some seeds. Sometimes they traded kuts [koots, soapstone] beads. They brought back shell beads and sea shells, traw-neck [abalone], cawm-sool [clam], and caw-sool [olivella or periwinkle]. Kahn-te told me about a funny dried thing that one of his men got in a trade. I know now it was a star fish.

Latta (1977:316-317) also noted that an important trail led west from Poso Chana through Los Gatos Canyon, the heart of the study area.

Archaeological Background

A cultural sequence for the western San Joaquin region was proposed by Olsen and Payen (1969) as a result of their excavations in the San Luis Reservoir area of Northern Fresno County. An archaeological complex containing diagnostic artifacts is proposed for each of the cultures thought to have inhabited the region through time. Rock art sites can sometimes be dated when found in relation to these diagnostic artifacts or features.

Panoche Complex

The Panoche Complex, which represents the most recent or protohistoric component of the Late Period in the western San Joaquin Valley, dates from approximately A.D. 1500 to the historic period (Moratto 1984:192). Diagnostic materials include steatite (soapstone) disc beads, well made flake scrapers, small side-notched projectile points, and bedrock mortars (Olsen and Payen 1969:39).

Gonzaga Complex

The Gonzaga Complex, representative of the Late Period in the region, is thought to date from *circa* A.D. 300 to 1000 (Moratto 1984:192). Diagnostic materials include several types of shell beads, serrated and stemmed obsidian projectile points, bone artifacts with notched edges, and large bowl mortars (Olsen and Payen 1969:40).

Pacheco Complex

Thought to date from *circa* A.D. 300 to 2600 B.C., the Pacheco Complex represents Middle Period occupation in the region. This complex has been divided into two phases: Pacheco A and B, each of which contains diagnostic elements (Moratto 1984:192).

Pacheco A: The time span for this phase is thought to range from *circa* A.D. 300 to 1600 B.C. Diagnostic artifacts include distinctive bone artifacts such as perforated canine teeth and bird bone whistles, polished stone ornaments, a heavy stone tool complex including milling slabs and mullers, and medium to large stemmed or side-notched projectile points. This phase exhibited a coastal influence (Olsen and Payen 1969:40-41).

Pacheco B: Thought to represent Middle Period occupation of the region from *circa* 1600 to 2600 B.C. (Moratto 1984:192), diagnostic materials include thick rectangular olivella beads, large projectile points, and a few heavy food processing tools (Olsen and Payen 1969:41).

Figure 2. Birdwell Rock viewed from the northeast.

Positas Complex

The Positas Complex is tentatively proposed to represent the Early Period in the region, *circa* 2600 to 3400 B.C. (Moratto 1984:192; Olsen and Payen 1969). Though some uncertainty is present due to a small sample size, diagnostic elements are thought to include flat perforated cobbles or "donut stones," short cylindrical pestles, and milling slabs (Olsen and Payen 1969:41).

It should be noted that there is a 500-year gap between the Panoche and the Gonzaga Complexes outlined above. Moratto (1984: 193) postulated a cultural hiatus for the region from A.D. 1000 to 1500 based on a lack of dated archaeological materials from this period. Breschini and Haversat (1987:13), however, have more recently reported several dates that fall within this range and feel that no such hiatus existed. We tend to agree.

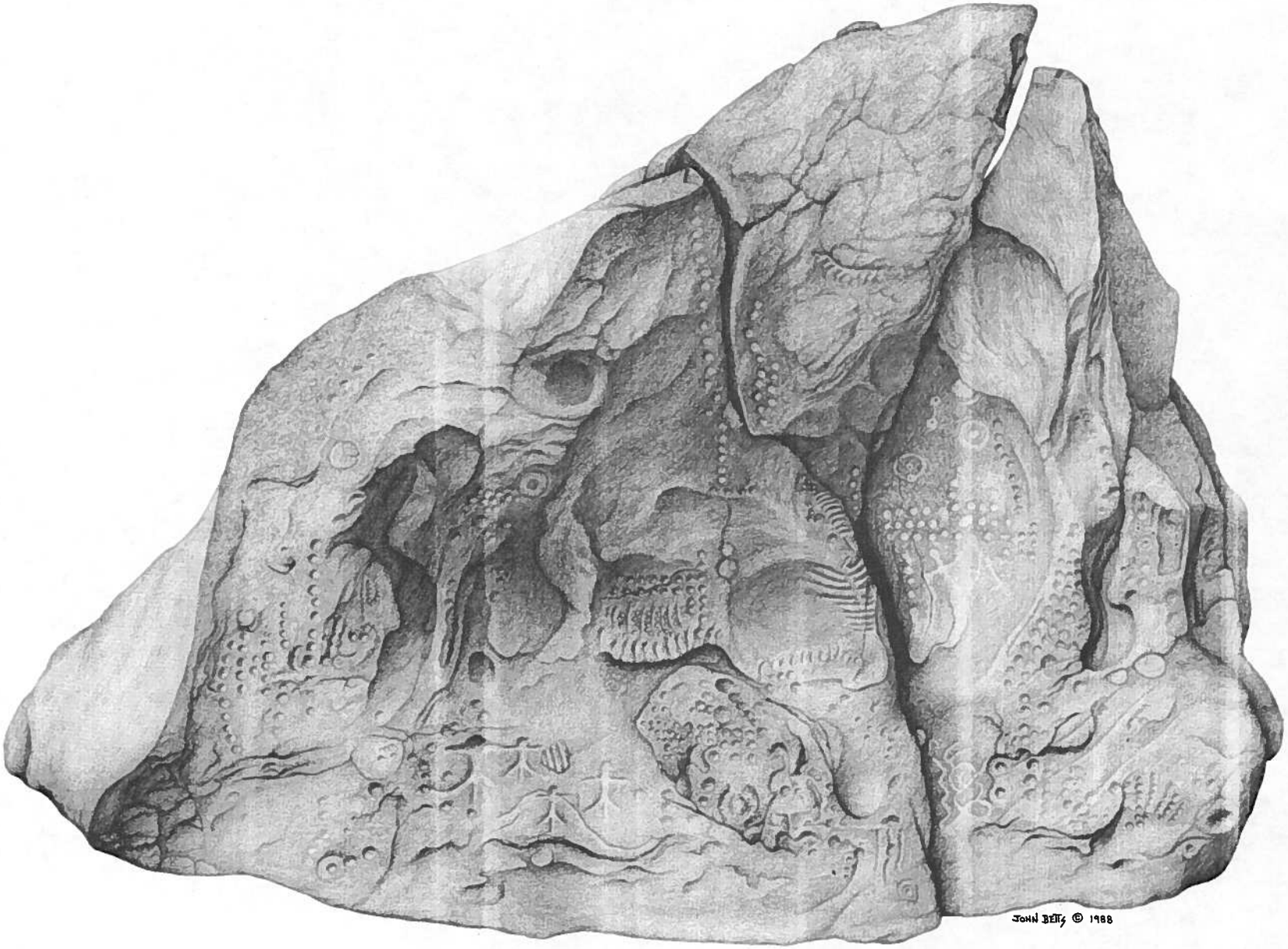

Figure 3. Birdwell Rock (illustration by John Betts).

Rock Art Site Descriptions

Birdwell Rock

Birdwell Rock (CA-Fre-2244) is a rock art site containing a large, elaborately decorated sandstone boulder, four cupule boulders, and fourteen bedrock mortars. The site is situated in the mountain/upland region of the study area at an elevation of 2640 feet. Although the area immediately surrounding the site is a flat open bench supporting grasses, shrubs, and scattered oaks, the general area is characterized by a scrub/chaparral vegetation community (Figure 2).

The Birdwell Rock site is located in a remote area which seems to contain few resources needed for habitation. There is evidence that food processing occurred at the site, however, as fourteen bedrock mortars and four unshaped cobble pestles were found. No obvious midden was noted during our inspection although an earlier survey report (Lipp 1986:2) described the presence of both midden and chert flakes. The area is considerably removed from any known substantial habitation site.

This is by far the most elaborate rock art site reported for the area. The main boulder is approximately four meters tall with nearly the entire east-facing vertical surface decorated with carvings (Figure 3). The rock was severely damaged by the massive 6.0 (Richter Scale) Nuñez Fault earthquake of July 1983 that widened two central fissures and caused a large chunk of the rock to break loose and fall. Exfoliation of rock surfaces containing petroglyph panels greatly increased as a result of the quake so that only patches of the red-colored patina remain. The rock art was deeply pecked and ground into this surface, however, and fortunately still can be accurately observed.

In the lower left portion of the rock art panel are four distinctive anthropomorphic figures. All of these human-like figures are similar in design though one is much larger than the others. They stand out as four little men with erect arms and large phallic appendages. Two similar anthropomorphs seem to be present in the depression on the right side of the main crack, though these are not as distinct as the lower four.

The most common figure used in this rock art panel is the dot or punctation. This occurs in orderly clusters and rows that often are organized to form motifs such as the possible animal track in the lower right corner. The punctations are much smaller than and should not be confused with cupules. They range in diameter from 0.5 to 3.0 cm but most are smaller than 2.0 cm. The most common punctation motif is a vertical line. Paired rows of punctations are also present, as are circle and dot cluster motifs.

Motifs composed of incised lines or grooves are also present. The grooves are between 3.0 and 8.0 cm long. They appear in three distinctive concentrations which border cracks or the margins of a depression. Two of these motifs are vertical lines and another group is perpendicular to the ground. Abstract curvilinear designs and complex circle and dot figures complete the assemblage on the main rock.

An outstanding cupule boulder occurs adjacent to the main rock on the north side. It contains approximately 200 broad dish-shaped pits, approximately 2.0 cm in diameter, arranged in parallel vertical rows. This boulder is unfortunately highly weathered and near perfect conditions are needed to appreciate the cupules.

Buckwheat

The Buckwheat site (CA-Fre-2261) is a large and complex occupation site located adjacent to a permanent spring. It consists of a scatter of chipped and ground stone artifacts, ten bedrock milling features, three distinct midden deposits, cupule boulders, and a petroglyph panel. Like Birdwell Rock, the site is situated in the mountain/upland portion of the study area, but differs in that it unquestionably functioned as a major occupation/camp site as well.

Located on the south-facing mid-slope area of Anticline Ridge above Oil Canyon, the site occupies a series of three benches, one below the other, bordered on two sides by steep draws on the east and west. A spring

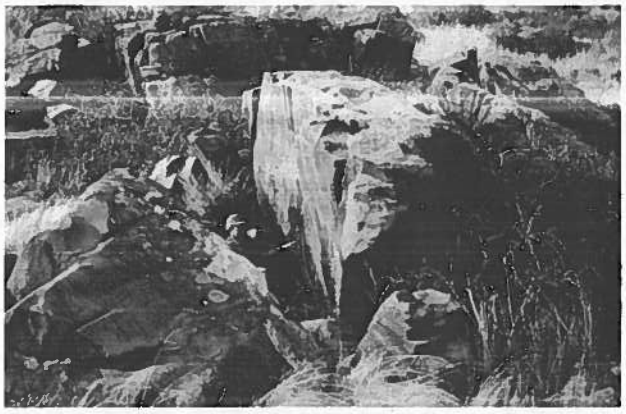

Figure 4. Boulder containing petroglyph panel at the Buckwheat Site.

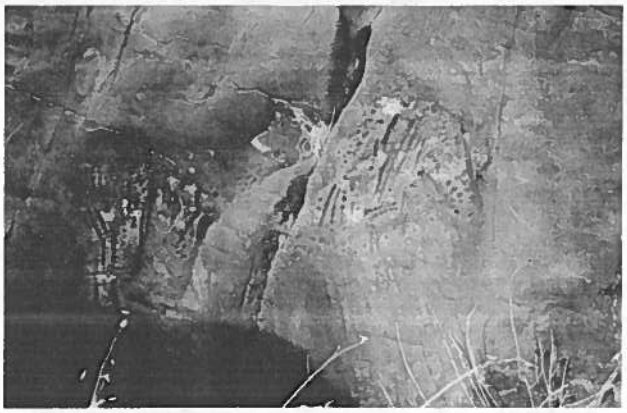

Figure 5. Punctation and groove petroglyphs at the Buckwheat Site.

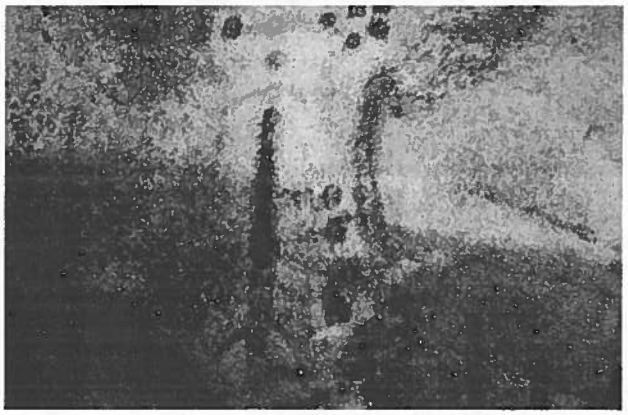

Figure 6. Anthropomorphic figure located at the Buckwheat Site.

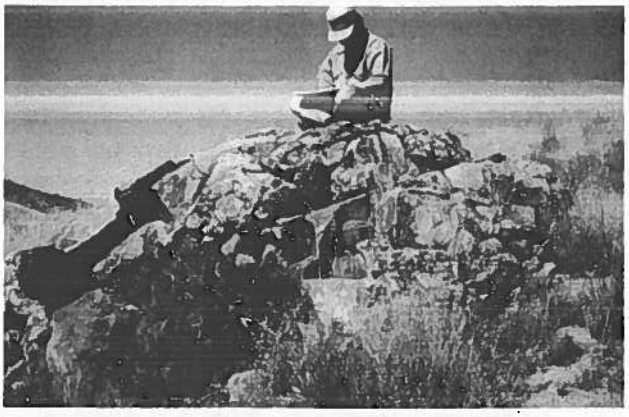

Figure 7. Overview of the Black Mountain petroglyph site (John Betts for scale).

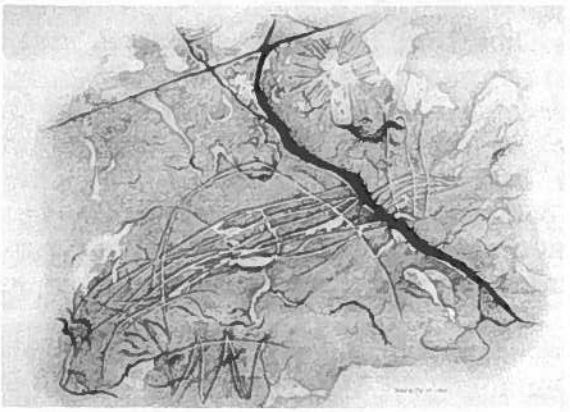

Figure 8. Black Mountain petroglyphs (illustration by John Betts).

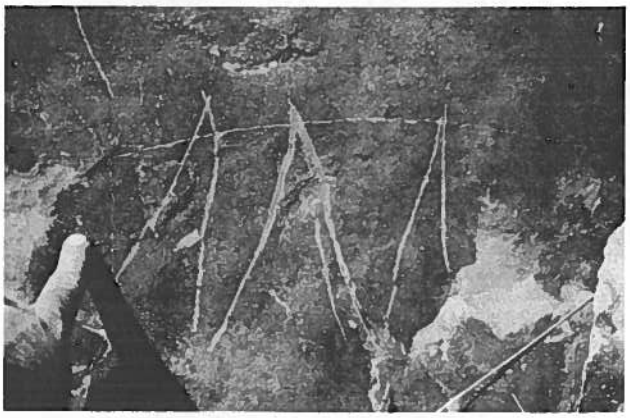

Figure 9. Black Mountain, detail of the three peaks motif.

occurs in the easternmost draw. Each of the three benches contains a substantial midden deposit exhibiting dark, ashy, friable soil, indicative of intensive occupation. The area is also covered with a sparse scatter of chipped stone artifacts dominated by flakes of Franciscan chert. Also found were sandstone bowls, a pestle, an obsidian drill or narrow biface, a mano, metate, knife base, and a Desert Side-notched projectile point. Fragments of burned mammal bone, charcoal, and shell were noted as well.

The site occurs at the ecotone between two vegetation communities. An open treeless grassland dominates the landscape south of the site and extends to the San Joaquin Valley. To the north, however, a chaparral community covered with buckwheat flourishes. There is a field of large sandstone boulders in the chaparral community which abruptly stop at the vegetation ecotone.

Five sandstone boulders contain cupules. The number of cups present on each boulder ranges from two to eight for a total of twenty-two. The cupules are not placed in any discernible pattern and they are remarkably similar in size and shape. Mostly broad, saucer-shaped depressions, they are 3.0 cm in diameter and 1.0 cm deep.

Finally, the site contains an elaborate rock art panel on a vertical surface of the largest boulder in the area (Figure 4). The only elements present are grooves and punctations, although they are clustered and arranged to form distinctive figures. The decorated surface measures approximately two meters square (Figure 5).

Punctations on the rock art panel range from 1.0 to 2.0 cm in diameter. Many of the smaller pits are over 2 cm deep, indicating manufacture by drilling rather than grinding. Numerous punctations are found in linear arrangements that include pairs of parallel lines or grooves that appear to have been incised prior to drilling. Several of these features, such as those in the lower right portion of the panel, have eroded to the point that only traces remain.

An anthropomorphic figure also is present on the panel (Figure 6). It features a punctation head, a long broad groove for a body, four short perpendicular lines symbolizing arms and legs, and a phallic appendage. Similarities exist with anthropomorphs at Birdwell Rock.

Black Mountain

The Black Mountain Site (CA-Fre-2245) is a relatively simple yet remarkably unusual petroglyph panel. It is situated on top of a hill in an open treeless grassland environment with the closest known occupation site one mile to the south. Petroglyphs are the only evidence of aboriginal use of the site area; no mortars, cupules, flakes, or midden are present. This is the only site of the study group found in such a setting and not associated with other cultural remains.

The rock art is located on a large sandstone boulder approximately two meters in diameter. The boulder has a vertical surface covered with a dark brown patina or cortex (Figure 7). The aboriginal artist produced the rock art by deeply scratching through the dark cortex exposing, the lighter parent material. Present are a "sunburst," a crosshatch design, a figure composed of several parallel lines intersected by a large arch, and a zigzag design with three peaks (Figure 8). All designs are contained in an 80 cm square panel.

The figures apparently were carved with a sharp pointed rock, each line produced in a single motion with heavy pressure. They are not abraded, pecked, or repeatedly scratched. The only exception to this is the central peak of the zigzag, which received a second deep scratch by the artist (Figure 9). The line that intersects the tops of the three peaks is not part of the rock art but rather a natural crack probably caused by the 1983 earthquakes.

Joaquin Mill

Along White Creek, two miles above its confluence with Los Gatos Creek, is the Joaquin Mill Site (CA-Fre-1345), including a cave, rockshelter, house pit, lithic scatter, and midden. Of particular interest are the rock art elements present in the cave (Figure 10).

The cave is approximately six feet high, ten feet wide at the opening, and twenty-five

feet deep. The opening faces west and overlooks the creek. The cave ceiling is blackened by smoke and natural staining in several areas. The original recorders noted that "a grooved initial 'M' and a sun design appear to have been etched into the rock in recent times"(Woodward and Manuel 1980:2).

Figure 10. Overview of Joaquin Mill cave looking east.

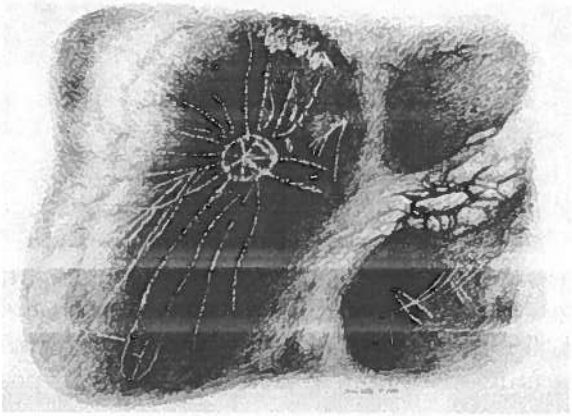

Figure 11. Joaquin Mill cave ceiling pictographs (illustration by John Betts).

A closer inspection of the cave ceiling showed that the reported designs were not scratched into the ceiling but marked over blackened areas using a white-colored substance. This material was rubbed onto the rough ceiling surface and clearly skips over recessed areas. One of the designs could be classified as a sun symbol, though it has a number of extraneous marks around it. Approximately 50.0 cm away is another design which consists of ten or so intersecting lines (Figure 11).

White Creek, located immediately adjacent to the mouth of the cave, drains an area of natural asbestos occurrence. The dry creek bed is encrusted with a white chalky residue and it appears likely that a cobble from it was used to mark the designs on the cave ceiling. These figures do not display the characteristic attributes of historic inscriptions or modern vandalism and there is little doubt that these pictographs, like the cupules and mortars, are of aboriginal origin.

Also located inside the cave are eleven bedrock mortars and a group of 14 cupules. The cupules are relatively large (3-5 cm in diameter) and placed on a vertical wall of the cave. The rockshelter downstream from the cave also contains bedrock mortars and a group of eight cupules.

Cupule Point

The Cupule Point Site (CA-Fre-2109) is located on Los Gatos Creek, occupying a point of land that projects into a huge sweeping bend in the drainage. A cluster of large and small sandstone boulders, 27 of which have been decorated with a total of 236 cupules, occurs at the toe of the ridge (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Overview of Cupule Point Site looking east.

There is no midden in direct association, but a major village site (Indian Springs) is nearby. A scatter of chert flakes, a mano, and four cobble tools thought to have been used for cupule manufacture also were found.

The cupules often are clustered on boulder surfaces facing south towards the creek.

They vary in size from 2 to 4.5 cm in diameter and from 0.5 to 1.5 cm deep; a large number are remarkably similar in shape. This latter group is characterized by a broad, dish-shaped cup which has been abraded smooth after having been pecked. Other cupules exhibit peck marks which have not been smoothed.

Figure 13. Cupules and Datura at the Cupule Point Site.

Datura (Jimsonweed) grows conspicuously in a pocket between several of the decorated boulders (Figure 13). Although the presence of this plant within the study area is not surprising, it is by no means commonly seen. This plant was used by many California Indian groups, including the Yokuts, as a ceremonial intoxicant for vision quests and male puberty initiation rites (Wallace 1978:455). The roots were crushed and used to make a tea consumed during special ceremonies. Since rock art sites often are suspected to be associated with magico-religious rituals and events, the presence of *Datura* here may not be a coincidence. Future researchers should be alert for this association, especially at cupule sites along the western San Joaquin Valley.

The site is strewn with stream cobbles, most of which show no sign of cultural use. A cluster of four cobbles was found adjacent to boulder No. 24, which bears fifteen smoothed cupules (Figure 14). Two are angular cobbles with pointed ends that show definite signs of battering. These are probably tools used to peck out cupules. Two abraders—oblong cobbles with a slight polish

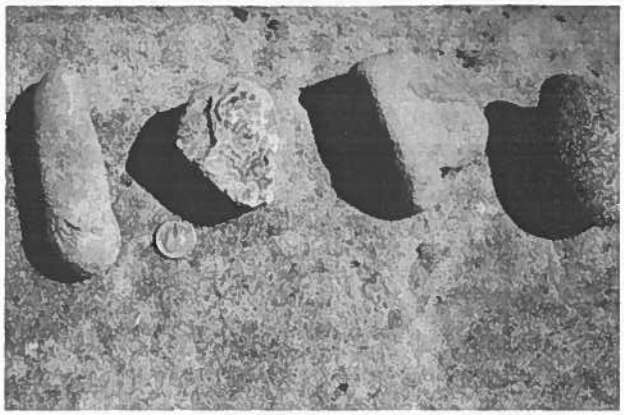

Figure 14. Cobble tools found at the Cupule Point Site.

on the distal end—also were found. One specimen fits perfectly into ten of the fifteen cupules at boulder No. 24 and was probably used to finish the cupules through smoothing.

Birdwell Ranch

The Birdwell Ranch Site (CA-Fre-2246) consists of a sandstone cupule boulder situated along Los Gatos Creek in the grassland vegetation community. The boulder is located along a dirt road near the base of a west-facing hill slope, at an elevation of 1320 feet. A cultural deposit, reported by the landowner but not yet verified by the study team, apparently is present on a nearby stream terrace. As at Cupule Point, *Datura* grows adjacent to the rock art.

The flat-topped cupule boulder (Figure 15), approximately two meters in diameter by one

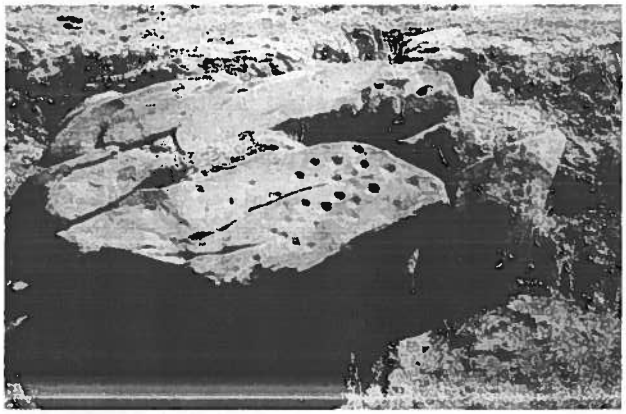

Figure 15. Birdwell Ranch cupule boulder.

meter tall, has been fractured into several pieces, probably by earthquakes. Cupules have been pecked into the flat upper surfaces which face slightly toward the creek.

Approximately 50 cupules are present on the boulder. They range in size from 3.0 to 5.0 cm in diameter and from 1.0 to 2.0 cm deep. Though most of the cupules appear to have been smoothed, several bear obvious peck marks which hint at their initial mode of manufacture.

Mule Ranch

Mule Ranch (CA-Fre-2262) is an occupation site situated adjacent to a reliable spring that surfaces in a seasonal stream bed (Figure 16). The site consists of a scatter of chipped and ground stone artifacts, a midden deposit, bedrock mortars, and several cupule boulders. It is situated within the grassland plant community at an elevation of 1520 feet.

Figure 16. Overview of Mule Ranch site looking east.

Chipped stone artifacts found at the site include a medium sized contracting stem projectile point of Franciscan chert, flakes of Franciscan and Monterey chert, and flake tools. Ground stone items include a probable sandstone pestle, two sandstone bowl mortars, and bowl mortar fragments. Three additional bowl mortars were reported.

Four large bedrock mortars are present at the site. Average dimensions are 15 cm in diameter by 5 cm deep. Four smaller bedrock mortars, or exceptionally large cupules, whose average dimensions are 6-8 cm in diameter by 2-3 cm deep, were noted as well. Additional bedrock mortars may have been inadvertently recorded as large cupules, or vice versa, as discussed below.

A minimum of 48 cupules located on six individual boulders were noted for the site. These range in size from 4 cm diameter by 1 cm deep saucer-shaped pits, similar to those present at Cupule Point, to large 12 cm diameter by 7 cm deep steep-sided cups. The "Swiss Cheese Rock" (Figure 17) shows an example of these large, well made cupules.

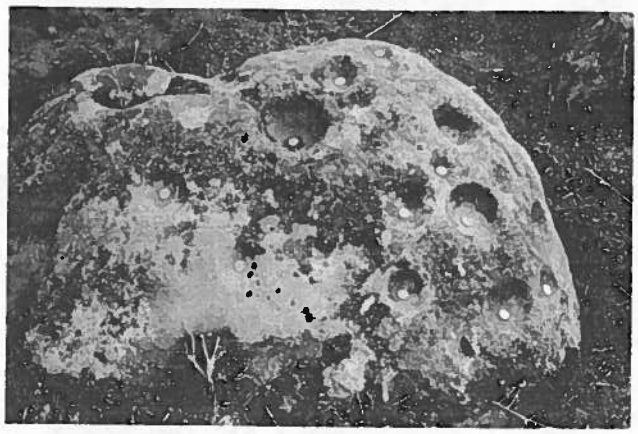

Figure 17. "Swiss Cheese Rock" cupule boulder at Mule Ranch.

As mentioned above, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish small bedrock mortars from large cupules. They apparently were manufactured using the same techniques, are often virtually identical in final form, and commonly occur together on the same rock. Bedrock mortars, however, are almost always situated on horizontal boulder surfaces. Cupules, on the other hand, occur on horizontal, vertical, and even overhanging surfaces such as cave ceilings. Pits located on vertical or overhanging surfaces are therefore ruled out as mortars.

Analysis of Site Attributes and Discussion of Rock Art Styles

All seven sites were evaluated according to a set of attributes chosen to demonstrate patterning and to elicit clues concerning site interpretations. The attributes and data which resulted from our analysis are pre-

sented in Table 1. Two distinctive types of rock art sites were recognized and isolated for characterization. These are the Coalinga Upland Style, represented by the Birdwell Rock and Buckwheat sites, and the Western San Joaquin Cupule Style represented by the Cupule Point, Birdwell Ranch, and Mule Ranch sites. The remaining two sites do not belong in either of these tentatively proposed styles. They are either enigmatic or related to rock art styles yet to be identified by the authors or other researchers in the area (Heizer and Clewlow 1973; Steward 1929).

	BIRDWELL ROCK	BUCKWHEAT	BLACK MOUNTAIN	JOAQUIN MILL	CUPULE POINT	BIRDWELL RANCH	MULE RANCH
BEDROCK MORTARS	+	+	–	+	+	–	+
CUPULES	+	+	–	+	+	+	+
MIDDEN IN DIRECT ASSOCIATION	–?	+	–	+	–	+?	+
FLAKED STONE	–?	+	–	+	+	–?	+
HOUSEPITS	–	–	–	+	–	–	–
CLOSE PROXIMITY TO WATER	–?	+	–	+	+	+	+
CLOSE PROXIMITY TO OAK TREES	+	–	–	+	–	+	–
PICTOGRAPHS	–	–	–	+	–	–	–
DATURA IN ASSOCIATION	–	–	–	–	+	+	–?
ANTHROPOMORPHIC MOTIFS	+	+	–	–	–	–	–
PUNCTATIONS	+	+	–	–	–	–	–
LINES OR GROOVES	+	+	+	–	–	–	–
OCCUPATION SITE AT OR IN CLOSE PROXIMITY	–	+	–	+	+	+	+
NUMBER OF CUPULES	200*	22	0	14	236	50*	48
NUMBER OF BRM'S	14	10	0	17	6	0	8
ELEVATION (IN FEET)	2640	2400	2160	2200	1020	1320	1520
VEGETATION COMMUNITY	C	C	G	OW	G	G	G
TOPOGRAPHIC SETTING	M	M	H	CB	CB	CB	CB

KEY

+ ATTRIBUTE PRESENT
– ATTRIBUTE ABSENT
C CHAPPARRAL
G GRASSLAND
OW OAK WOODLAND
H HILLTOP
CB CANYON BOTTOM
M MOUNTAIN (UPLAND REGION)
? UNABLE TO VERIFY DATA INCONCLUSIVE OBSERVATIONS UNCERTAIN
* APPROXIMATE COUNT

Table 1. Analysis of site attributes.

Coalinga Upland Style

We suggest that this is a valid style of which we have two examples. It is characterized by the following traits:

1) Located in the mountain/upland topographic setting rather than along lower drainages.

2) Dominated by the use of dots, drill hole punctations, and grooves, often in complex arrangements.

3) Tight linear arrangements of small dots extremely common.

4) Phallic anthropomorphs.

5) Drill holes sometimes inside the grooves.

6) Bedrock mortars and cupule boulders nearby.

7) Curvilinear motifs and complex circle and dot arrangements possible.

Western San Joaquin Cupule Style

Three sites in the study group, and others observed in the general region, are representative of this style. Due to the nondescript nature of cupule versus other types of rock art sites, it is more difficult to state the specific traits which make this group distinctive. Nonetheless, sites of this group contain the following traits:

1) Cupule boulders located along stream margins, often on streams which were used as transportation corridors between the San Joaquin Valley and the coast (*e.g.*, Los Gatos, Orestimba, Cottonwood).

2) Distribution along the western edge of the San Joaquin Valley on the eastern foothills of the Coast Range and rarely (if ever) as far west as the summit of this range.

3) Associated with late prehistoric occupation sites located directly at the cupule site or in close proximity.

4) House pits sometimes occur nearby.

5) Cupules never organized in rows or lines, but arranged in clusters, quite often located on a sloping surface facing a trail or creek.

6) Broad, shallow, smooth cupules 3 cm in diameter and 1 cm deep are most common, but some variants occur. Most, but not all, are ground smooth with an abrader.

7) Bedrock mortars present.

Discussion

At the present time we are unable to define the geographic limits of these two rock art styles. This is especially true for the proposed Coalinga Upland Style. Two similar sites, both in coastal regions, were discovered in the literature, which suggests that this style might be fairly widespread and not limited to our study area. A remarkably similar site from Imperial County recently reported by Cerutti (1986:71-76) suggests that this style may have a great range indeed.

It should be emphasized that we are not attempting to lump all cupule occurrences within the region into a single "style." There are cupules at Joaquin Mill and another recently discovered site at the mouth of White Creek. Cupules occur too at Birdwell Rock and Buckwheat, but none of these sites share the characteristic attributes of the proposed Western San Joaquin Cupule Style.

Though the limits of the proposed Western San Joaquin Cupule Style are not precisely known, it unquestionably has a larger range of occurrences than our study area. There is no doubt that the Indian Point site at San Luis Reservoir (CA-Mer-119), located approximately 80 miles north, fits perfectly into our style. The style apparently occurs along the western margin of the San Joaquin Valley, extending into the foothills of the Coast Range. While the northern and southern limits are not known, they may prove to correspond with the boundaries of the Northern and Southern Valley Yokuts.

The notion that cupules were deliberately placed to be viewed along the trail has been mentioned. In a description of the Indian Point cupule boulder Foster (1982:2-3) noted that "The dense concentration of cupules on the side of the boulder would have been most easily viewed by people walking by the site along San Luis Creek. It seems likely that the cupules represent a ritual that is associated to either the trail, the pass, or the dead."

The position of the cupules and the site pattern (along trails connecting the San Joaquin Valley with the Pacific Ocean) does indeed suggest that these cupule boulders served as some sort of trail marker or perhaps was related to a ritual act to insure safe passage. According to William J. Wallace (personal communication 1989), this type of ritual was known to occur in northwestern California and along the Colorado River.

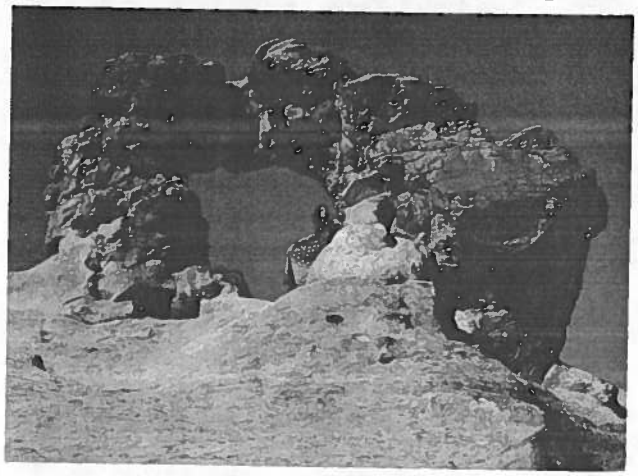

Figure 18. Donut Rock prior to its demise in a 1983 earthquake (photo courtesy of Louis Deford).

By contrast, the Birdwell Rock, Buckwheat, and Black Mountain sites are situated not along well-used trails, but rather in the rocky uplands in close proximity to two distinctive landmarks—Donut Rock and Joaquin Rocks. Prior to its demise in the 1983 Nuñez Fault earthquake, Donut Rock was a magnificent arch (Figure 18) in clear view from all three sites. Regarding the Birdwell Rock site, Donald Lipp (1986:2) suggested an affiliation to Donut Rock: "This site represents a possible open-air ceremonial site/solstice observatory...[and] may have been used in conjunction with Donut Rock, to the east, as a solstice observation point. The rock art may be associated with male puberty rites or vision quest activities."

To explore the solstice possibility, William Johnson (personal communication 1988) observed the summer solstice sunrise from Birdwell Rock in 1988. He did not, however, detect any remarkable event. The sun rose above the horizon a considerable distance to the north (left) of the former location of Donut Rock. This does not preclude the possibility that Birdwell Rock may have been used as a solstice observatory, but there is no obvious association between the sunrise on this day and Donut Rock.

The other dominant landmark, Joaquin Rocks, also may be linked to the three mountain rock art sites. Joaquin Rocks is a distinctive cluster of three sandstone monoliths undoubtedly important to the people living in the area (Figure 19). As suggested by William Johnson (personal communication 1988) the triple peak motif at the Black Mountain site (Figure 11) may indeed be a rendering of Joaquin Rocks. A pictograph reported for the Joaquin Rocks area (Latta 1950) may suggest its aboriginal importance as well.

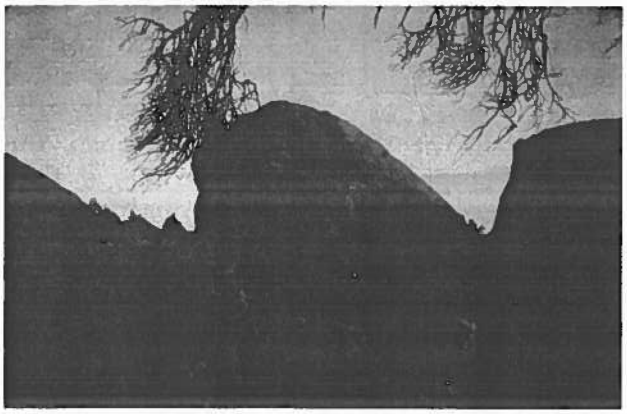

Figure 19. Joaquin Rocks viewed from the south.

A possible link to coastal rock art sites is suggested at Birdwell Rock and Buckwheat. Both are remarkably similar to two petroglyph boulders on the coast. Pool Rock (CA-SBa-1632) is a large sandstone boulder in Santa Barbara County decorated with figures dominated by the use of dots and lines. Although Pool Rock contains numerous bear track motifs, absent from Birdwell Rock, and lacks the phallic anthropomorphs present on the latter, one is immediately struck by a feeling of similarity between the two boulders. Likewise, a rock art site in coastal San Luis Obispo County (CA-SLO-832) is remarkably similar to the Buckwheat site in its dominant use of vertical grooves, drill-hole punctations, and punctations placed inside grooves. Though the proposed affiliation is tentative, we know that coastal people visited the study area during trading expeditions, as noted previously by Latta (1977:728-729).

Like all rock art sites in the state, those of the study area are difficult to date. We do have limited archaeological evidence, however, that suggests a Late Period affiliation for all seven sites. Evidence includes the presence of bedrock mortars and small side-notched arrow points representative of the Panoche Complex and sandstone bowl mortars and medium-sized, stemmed projectile points from the Gonzaga Complex.

None of the seven rock art sites produced evidence for Middle or Early Period occupation, even though earlier sites do exist in the vicinity. Noteworthy are two Middle Period sites located in the study area—Jacalitos and Mitchell Springs. These sites contain extensive lithic workshops whose large percussion-flaked projectile points and bifaces appear to represent the Pacheco Complex. Interestingly, neither contains rock art, though this may be due to a lack of suitable rock surfaces in the area.

In sum, there is no evidence to support an assessment of tremendous antiquity for any of the rock art sites. The unusual variety of motifs and the complexity at Birdwell Rock do suggest the art was developed over a period of time. In fact, some evidence of rock art style evolution is implied in our sample. At the present time, however, it appears that all sites easily could be placed within the Late Prehistoric Period (post-300 A.D.).

It is hoped that archaeological test excavations can someday be conducted at the Birdwell Rock, Buckwheat, Mule Ranch, and Joaquin Mill sites to explore prehistoric manifestations and provide more detailed dating evidence for the rock art they contain.

Conclusion

The Diablo Range is one of the least known archaeological zones in the state, particularly with respect to rock art, even though cupules (Parkman 1986) and red painted figures (Olsen and Payen 1969:1) have been previously reported. Although thought to be "unimportant" and with "few residents" by Kroeber (1925:476), probably due to the paucity of available information, recent archaeological studies have shown this to be a mistaken view. The study area contains an enormous quantity and variety of archaeological remains which suggest more than casual occupation in prehistoric times.

The seven rock art sites of the study group have been organized into two styles, with two anomalous sites. We propose that all sites date roughly to the Late Period. This suggests that rock art in the region underwent an evolution during this period, or, that two distinct groups of people produced the art. We tend to favor the latter notion and further suggest that the mountain rock art may have been made by coastal rather than interior people.

Postscript

Two important, newsworthy items concerning rock art in the "Coalinga Backcountry" have surfaced since our manuscript was submitted for publication in March, 1989. One of these we are pleased to report; the other causes us tremendous grief. We are grateful to the editor for allowing us the opportunity to submit both items as a postscript.

An additional rock art site was discovered by COALARG member Louis Deford and his daughter Suzanne Deford at Los Gatos County Park and within our study area. They were examining a bedrock mortar (which had been known to the locals for many years) situated on a single round sandstone boulder near the baseball field and overlooking the creek below. They discovered that the south face of this rock is decorated with over forty cupules and the site closely fits the proposed model for the *Western San Joaquin Cupule Style* defined in this report. Like the others, these cupules are all clustered on the side of the boulder facing the creek, the site is on the main trail from the valley to the coast, it is close to a late-period occupation site, and the cupules themselves are broad, shallow, and smooth pits approximately 3 cm in diameter, 1 cm deep, and ground smooth with an abrader. This site will soon be formally recorded and entered into the files of COALARG.

On a much sadder note, we regret to announce that the Cupule Point Site (CA-Fre-2109), one of the most spectacular pitted-boulder sites in this region, has recently been destroyed by an illegal rock quarry operation. Without the landowner's permission, someone using a backhoe removed most of the boulders from this site. This probably occurred during November, 1989. The damage was first witnessed by Bill Johnson on December 6, 1989. The Fresno County Sheriffs Office later took a report and began an investigation.

On January 10, 1990, boulders similar to those removed from Cupule Point were observed at the Peppertree Townhomes in Coalinga, California. Acting upon the request of Deputy Sheriff Lee Nilmeier, we documented the damage at the site and examined the boulders at Peppertree to determine if they came from Cupule Point. It was easy to prove they did (Foster 1990). Boulders #1 and #13 which were well documented by COALARG were unmistakably recognized. An arrest linked to this incident is hopefully forthcoming. COALARG will be involved with an attempt to relocate the cupule boulders to either the Coalinga Museum or back to the site and to try to repair some of the damage. I am not optimistic, however, since the destruction was so complete and so few of the boulders have been found. Unfortunately, the significance of the Cupule Point site was just beginning to be realized.

The people of California, especially local residents of Coalinga lost a relic of the prehistoric past, a real gem of a site right in their backyard. For Native people, it could have served as a source of spiritual and religious

power. For archaeologists it was a source of irreplaceable scientific information. It is lost for all of us. The real shame is that so few people ever had a chance to see it.

—Daniel G. Foster
January 17, 1990

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Local landowners Jack James and Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Birdwell provided access to sites situated on privately owned lands. Jack in particular showed great enthusiasm for the project and arranged for group study of local collections. Steve Addington of the Bureau of Land Management allowed access to Federal lands and provided copies of agency reports.

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Finally, William Johnson, State Forest Ranger I from CDF's Coalinga Fire Station, should be acknowledged as the driving force behind this and other studies currently taking place in the area. Bill's enthusiasm for archaeology and knowledge of the local region are second to none. With the continued support of Bill Johnson and others the newly formed Coalinga Archaeological Research Group (COALARG) hopes to dispel the "cultural desert" myth and demonstrate that this area is, in fact, an archaeological gold mine.

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